

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

**Implications of the June 12 Iranian Presidential Election**

Fariborz Ghadar

June 1, 2009

Iranians will go to the polls on June 12 to vote in a presidential election that pits the hard-line Mahmoud Ahmadinejad against two relatively moderate and one conservative challenger. Although some argue that Ahmadinejad's reelection is a foregone conclusion, I do not think the outcome is all that clear.

How will the Iranian people vote? To answer this question, we need to look at the demographic composition of the nation. The voting age is set at 18 years; therefore, Iran has approximately 45–50 million eligible voters. Assuming a two-thirds turnout (in line with past statistics), there will be around 30 million votes cast. The electorate is diverse: differences include urban versus rural, generational, and socioeconomic. Some 70 percent of the population is now urban. About 45 percent of the potential voters are under 30, and given that they have historically had a higher turnout, it is likely that the under-30 vote will exceed 50 percent.

So in two weeks, these voters will determine whether their present president, “the Holocaust-denying, Israel-hating, America-bashing incumbent,” will remain in office and continue his drive to make Iran a nuclear power.

**Q1: Are there any significant differences among the candidates?**

**A1:** Yes. In addition to President Ahmadinejad, there are three other candidates: the former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi; former parliament speaker Mehdi Karoubi; and the commander of the Revolutionary Guard during the war with Iraq, Mohsen Rezaie. Rezaie is also presently the secretary of the Expediency Council. This lineup of older contenders has little appeal to the youth vote. Their positions, however, are relatively distinct. This election is Ahmadinejad's biggest popularity test since his surprise win in the 2005 presidential race.

**President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad:** He is a former Revolutionary Guard, and his anti-Israel rhetoric and support for Iran's nuclear program have caused alarm in the West. During his term in office, we have seen tensions rise in U.S.-Iranian relations. At 53, he is the youngest candidate, Iran's first nonclerical president in more than 25 years, and appears to have the backing of the supreme leader. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei urged voters in May to choose an anti-Western leader. However, Ahmadinejad is blamed for a disappointing economy, unemployment, and rising inflation. He has promised to share Iran's oil wealth more fairly: a position that still resonates with the poor.

For Ahmadinejad, the stakes could not be higher. In order to assure his support among the poor, the government is handing out 400,000 tons of free potatoes in rural areas. Ahmadinejad's opponents accuse him of trying to buy the poor's vote. “Death to potatoes” is a moderate rally chant. While to much of the world the election is about Iran's nuclear ambitions, to most Iranians, the economy is the main issue.

**Mir Hossein Mousavi:** The 67-year-old Mousavi is viewed by many moderates and some conservatives as Ahmadinejad's strongest challenger. He is known for his competent economic management when he was prime minister during Iran's war with Iraq (1980–88). However, critics argue that it was more of a Soviet-style state-controlled economy; although presently, Mousavi advocates a more liberal economic posture to cope with inflation and unemployment.

Mousavi was chosen by Khomeini as prime minister, but after Khomeini's death, Khamenei became the supreme spiritual leader, and in 1989, the post of prime minister was abolished. Mousavi, an architect and painter, kept out of politics until recently and is not as well known among the young. Older Iranians remember him as a close Khomeini ally. However, today Mousavi is successfully wooing young voters with reformist statements. He, with help from his wife, who has revolutionary credentials of her own, are also spearheading women's rights issues. His platform also backs a more conciliatory foreign policy toward the West. Mousavi's past performance, however, suggests to many observers that he is likely to run the country much as previous presidents have done.

**Mehdi Karoubi:** Karoubi is the most moderate of the candidates and a strong critic of Ahmadinejad. He is 72 years old. Karoubi was an activist in the Islamic revolution but joined the reformist camp during the time when Khatami was president from 1997 to 2005. Karoubi was parliament speaker from 2000 to 2004; however, he often buckled to

pressure from conservative religious and security hard-liners and blocked Khatami's attempts at reform. He made an unsuccessful run for the presidency in 2005.

Karoubi is in favor of better ties with the United States and has proposed a plan to give shares of Iran's oil earnings to every Iranian over 18.

**Mohsen Rezaie:** Rezaie is branded as a moderate conservative. He is 55 years old; only slightly older than Ahmadinejad. He was commander of the Revolutionary Guards during the Iraq war and now heads the Expediency Council. In 2006, an international arrest warrant was issued against Rezaie for alleged involvement in the Buenos Aires bombing of a Jewish cultural center in 1994; he denies any involvement. He will pursue Ahmadinejad's ideological path but with a more moderate foreign policy position. He supports privatization to improve the non-oil sectors of the economy. His support is likely to come from conservatives opposed to Ahmadinejad. This may split the conservative vote, preventing a 50 percent first round decision. Few expect him to win the election.

**Q2: Given that the supreme leader, 200 members of parliament, and the head of the judiciary have given tacit or official endorsement of Ahmadinejad, do any of the other candidates really have a chance?**

**A2:** Khamenei has repeatedly said in public that he will not declare a preference among the presidential candidates. In a speech in March 21, Khamenei stated: "There were some rumors that I support a special candidate for the presidential elections. But I have one vote, and I would not determine a certain candidate because people themselves should choose their candidates based on their own knowledge." Despite all his statements, the operational arm of the government that Khamenei directs and the portion of the executive branch that the president controls has been very supportive of Ahmadinejad.

Despite this, I believe a reform candidate does have a chance.

**Q3: The social-networking site Facebook was blocked for about 3 days and then was reinstated; what role is technology playing in the election?**

**A3:** The majority of the voting population will be young and urban. These mobile phone users are being bombarded with text messages in the run-up to the election. More than 23 million Iranians, or some 30 percent of Iran's population of 70 million, have access to the Internet. Some 45 million, or more than 60 percent, have mobile phones. E-mails and blogs are playing an impressive and significant role for the first time in this election. Iranian elections have historically been carried out using political messages either blared through loudspeakers on vehicles driving in the congested cities or on posters and walls. Often people would be bused to campaign rallies.

Ahmadinejad, whose support centers on the rural poor, is also texting and e-mailing his achievements, but given the demographics of his supporters, he and his team are showing signs of concern. Ahmadinejad supporters have complained about rude jokes and inaccurate statements aimed at their leader via text messages and in blogs. The Tehran prosecutor's office has threatened to crack down on messages offending candidates.

The Facebook ban was lifted on May 26 after 3 days, following very strong criticism from moderate candidates. It is estimated that 150,000 Iranians are Facebook members, but the fact that the ban was lifted is an indication that the regime, while attempting to control blogs and track e-mails, is concerned about alienating the young who are using the new technologies.

**Q4: What role do women play in this election given the fact that women may have numerous justifiable demands from a system that does not give them the same rights as men?**

**A4:** Women represent more than 50 percent of the population and more than half of university graduates. There are a number of high-profile women in Iran such as Shirin Ebadi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003, and Maoumeh Ebtekar, who was Khatami's vice president. Women will be a deciding factor in this election. Presidential hopeful Mousavi often campaigns with his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, who is rewriting the role of the political spouse in conservative Iran—and will likely help her husband's candidacy in the election. She is eloquent and has fast become a political draw on her own. During the 1970s, she was a supporter of Shariati, one of the main influences of many leaders of the revolution. However, in 2006, she was dismissed by conservative elements of the regime from her position as dean of Zahra University in Tehran.

On the campaign trail, Rahnavard is asking tough and sensitive questions such as: Why are students and professors being put in jail? Why are liberal professors forced to retire? Why aren't political prisoners released? Why are no women

cleared to run for president? Why are there no women in the cabinet? Why are housewives not covered by insurance? Why does the law state that women inherit half as much as the men and their word is considered half that of a man's in court testimony? Why is there so much discrimination against women?

She is reviving hopes that women will regain some of their rights that they lost during Ahmadinejad's term in office. She is the first candidate's wife to be so active in her husband's campaign and promises to remain vocal about women issues if her husband is elected president. In campaign rallies she often speaks before her husband. In contrast, Ahmadinejad's wife is hardly known, and even Khatami's wife was rarely in the public eye.

This issue is likely to be a major advantage to Mousavi's campaign.

**Q5: Will there be any change in the U.S.-Iran relationship given the candidates and their respective positions?**

**A5:** While "it's the economy, stupid" seems to be relevant in Iran's June election, surprisingly, foreign policy has also emerged as a major battleground.

All three challenging candidates have publicly criticized Ahmadinejad on topics long considered off limits, such as Iran's nuclear program and Ahmadinejad's poisonous statements about Israel. Candidates continually state that Iranian passports are now worse than those of "pirate-infested Somalia" and that the regime has disgraced the Iranian people. In particular, Karoubi insists that Iran needs to be more transparent and rational in pursuing its non-weapon nuclear energy program. He strongly advocates a different approach to the world in TV appearances.

While the nuclear issue is in the purview of the supreme leader, he is influenced by public opinion, and the role of the president is not without influence.

**Q6: Are the Iranians and the United States ready to forgive and forget 30 years of aggression and hostility toward each other?**

**A6:** Over the past decades, much has been written and said about the "axis of evil" and "the great Satan." However, polls indicate that the Iranian people have a very positive attitude toward the American people. The negative propaganda is perceived as exactly that: propaganda. Once the salient issues are resolved, and after some reasonable time, I believe both parties will forgive if not forget.

The two nations have a number of common interests: stability in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan; the prevention of the rise of the Taliban and the battle with al Qaeda; Afghanistan's opium production and its devastating impact on Iran and much of the region; and increasing oil and gas production so as to manage potential oil price increases and help the energy needs of allies such as Turkey, India, and Pakistan and even reduce the grip of Russia on European gas consumers.

A resolution of the Iranian situation will also help Israel by potentially calming the Lebanon and Gaza problems so that a rational Palestinian solution can progress under the Obama administration.

**Q7: The nuclear issue is a decision only the supreme leader seems to be in a position to respond to. Will this election have any impact on the nuclear issue?**

**A7:** In 1979, Iran's constitution established the country as an Islamic Republic. The supreme leader is selected by 86 learned clerics (the Assembly of Experts), who themselves are elected by the public from various sectors of the nation. The supreme leader, who is always a cleric, is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and is the only person who can declare war. The supreme leader also appoints the Iranian judiciary. He remains in power for life unless removed by the Assembly of Experts. Not only has this never occurred, but the Assembly has never even overturned any of his rulings. While this may seem dictatorial, another more probable explanation is that the supreme leader's decisions are often made by consensus. Therefore, public opinion as reflected by the elections—no matter how imperfect the elections may be—should not be underestimated.

The president is elected for a four-year term by direct popular vote. He reports to the supreme leader, but his influence is not insignificant. Looking at the impact of Ahmadinejad on Iranian domestic and international relationships should make this fact perfectly clear.

**Q8: From 2003 to 2005, when Iran suspended its uranium enrichment program, there was a window of opportunity to move forward in negotiations, but Iran decided to restart its enrichment program. Are there any lessons that we can draw from that experience?**

**A8:** The Iranian position is that it suspended uranium enrichment on a temporary basis in the hope that a mechanism to allay the West's concerns about Iran's non-weapon nuclear program could be found. During this time, the Europeans also offered and put together a package containing civilian planes, oil-drilling equipment, power plants, membership to the World Trade Organization, and a number of economic cooperative activities. However, this package could not be implemented effectively as long as the United States was unwilling to lift its economic sanctions. After nearly two years, Iran concluded that the West was playing a delaying tactic. Ahmadinejad was elected and uranium enrichment was reinstated.

Often, our plans have unintended consequences of which we are at first not aware. Take the talk about sanctions on imported gasoline. Without discussing the likelihood of the sanctions' success, they will only hurt the public. The regime will use this as an opportunity to further rationing and increase gasoline prices, steps that the regime probably wants to implement presently but needs an excuse to put into effect—an excuse that sanctions will provide. In fact, the present rationing mechanism was justified as a way to respond to sanctions and the threat of gasoline cutoff; the effect of these threats was to reduce domestic demand by 20 million liters per day and reduce smuggling of cheap Iranian products to neighboring countries—steps the government wanted to take anyway. The main lesson is to carefully look at the secondary and tertiary impact of our actions.

Iran has stated that it does not have or intend to have a nuclear weapons program. Furthermore, it has been stated that such a program is against Islam. Being a member of the international Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, it is also Iran's duty to avoid such an endeavor. That is a very different position from Korea. Whether we believe the Iranians or not, their position offers a range of possibilities that should be pursued.

**Q9: Is the Obama administration doing well so far in terms of dealing with Iran?**

**A9:** The well-delivered messages and gestures to the people of Iran and their leaders have been very helpful. The No-Rouz (Iranian New Year) message was well received. The policy changes are, however, invisible. The administration is still young, and the Iranian position is fluid, so more time is needed. I believe both the United States and the Iranians will be ready to negotiate a few months after the Iranian election. The critical time frames are the fourth quarter of 2009 and the first months of 2010. I am, however, optimistic that a gradual reduction of tensions will lead to the resolution of a number of issues that, while not perfect, will be acceptable to both sides.

*Fariborz Ghadar is a distinguished senior scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., and the William A. Schreyer Chair of Global Management and director of the Center for Global Business Studies at Pennsylvania State University.*

***Critical Questions* is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**

© 2009 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.